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Epistolary Documents in High-Medieval History-Writing

Abstract

This article focuses on the way history-writers in the reign of King Henry II (King of England, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and Count of Anjou, d. 1189) quoted documents in their histories. Although scholars have often identified documentary quotation as the most distinctive feature of history-writing from this period, I argue here that the practice of quoting documents has not been properly assessed from a rhetorical perspective. Focusing on epistolary documents in the histories written by Roger of Howden, Ralph de Diceto and Stephen of Rouen, I suggest that scholarship on these texts has distinguished between ‘document’ and ‘narrative’ too sharply. My argument, rather, is that epistolary documents functioned as narrative intertexts; they were not simply truth claims deployed to authenticate a history-writer’s own narrative. The corollary to this is that scholarship on these texts needs to negotiate the potentially fictive nature of documentary intertexts, just as it has long negotiated the potentially fictive nature of the historiographical discourse that frames them.¹

1. I am grateful to my colleagues at the Centre for Medieval Literature in Odense and York, to the members of the York Fictionality Forum, and to the anonymous reviewers for the improvements that they suggested to this article. The research for this article was supported by the Carlsberg Foundation and by the Danish National Research Foundation (project DNRFF102ID).

2. I use this shorthand to refer to the lands ruled by Henry II (and his sons) both sides of the English channel.

Introduction

The later twelfth century was “a golden age of historiography in England” (Gransden 221). For Antonia Gransden, but also to numerous other more or less standard accounts of the history written in this period, this age was golden both because of the quantity of history-writing that it produced – which is impressive – and also because of its quality. Here was a sort of history-writing that finally looked like something modern. It was written by administrators with a secular outlook; it was focused on the state and its development; and those who wrote it used “official documents” in the way that all good historians should. Yet, although those documents feature in almost every account of the history-writing of the Age of the Angevins,² that history-writing’s use of documents has only ever been seriously studied from a diplomatic perspective. That is, modern historians have often “mined” this period’s history-writing for its documents, only

3. For a critique of the “mining” of Roger of Howden “first for facts and then for documents,” see Gillingham, “Travels” 71. Giry offers a classic diplomatic perspective when he stresses the need to assess the “degré de confiance que mérite l’ensemble de l’œuvre et son auteur” (“the degree of trust that the work as a whole, and its author, merits”) in order to assess the value of charters inserted into chronicles (34); Richardson and Sayles follow this advice to the letter, directing a suspicious glare at Roger of Howden – whom they considered “incapable of distinguishing between authentic legislative instruments and apocryphal enactments” – and a deeply suspect historian as a consequence (448).

4. For Howden’s career, see Barlow; Stenton; Corner, “*Gesta Regis*”; Gillingham, “Writing the Biography”; Gillingham, “Travels”; Gillingham, “Roger of Howden on Crusade”.

5. The *Gesta* covers the years 1170 to 1192. The *Chronica* was a reworking of the *Gesta* that extended its chronological scope back to the seventh century and beyond 1192.

6. The *Abbreviationes* was a universal chronicle running up to the year 1148; the *Ymages* ran from 1148, and Diceto wrote it contemporaneously with the events that he was recording from the year 1188.

7. Diceto made an innovative survey of his Chapter’s property and codified the cathedral’s charters as part of the process, and he was one of those English canonists who collected and circulated decretal letters “with an almost incredible enthusiasm” in this period. (For the property survey, see Hale; for the charters, see Clanchy 160 and Ralph de Diceto vol. 1, lxx–lxxi, n. 2); for the decretal letters, see Duggan 22.

8. The reliability of Herodotus’s documentary evidence has since been questioned, raising “fundamental doubts about his honesty” (West 278–305). By connecting documents with (dis)honesty, West reveals the ideological and moral weight that modern scholarship sometimes makes documents bear.

considering the historiographical framework in the course of determining how “good” or “bad” those documentary reproductions were.³

This means that the literary forms and the rhetorical functions of those documents have been dealt with only in passing. And the relationship between documents, the history-writing that quotes them, and the state whose rise they are supposed to demonstrate has never seriously been questioned.

In this article I want to problematize the rhetorical role of documents in high-medieval history-writing. I’m going to focus, at least to start with, on the documents invoked by two history-writers from this period. Both of these history-writers are famous for using documents. The first of these is Roger of Howden, *clericus regis* and parson of Howden (d. 1201/2),⁴ who wrote two chronicles in this period (the *Gesta regis Henrici secundi* and the *Chronica*).⁵ Howden used so many documents in his *Gesta* that Gransden argued that it reads “more like a register than a literary work” (Gransden 221). The second history-writer is Ralph de Diceto (d. 1199/1200), who also wrote two chronicles: the *Abbreviationes chronicorum* and the *Ymages historiarum*.⁶ Like Howden, Diceto was a well-connected administrator as well as a history-writer (he was dean of St. Paul’s and archdeacon of Middlesex; and had walk-on parts in many of the major political events of his day). Like Howden, Diceto too was a keen user of documents – both in his history-writing and in his administrative work.⁷ And, like Howden’s, Diceto’s documents have long caught the eye of scholars (see e.g. Greenway, “Historical Writing” 152).

From one perspective, the fact that scholars have neglected to interrogate the rhetorical role of the documents in these histories is not surprising. Howden’s and Diceto’s documentary moves have been camouflaged because they seem so routine. When a history-writer like Howden quoted a document, he apparently made a move that is at the very heart of the “historiographical operation,” as Michel de Certeau called it. In history-writing, says Certeau, “everything begins with the gesture of setting aside, of putting together, of transforming certain classified objects into ‘documents’” (De Certeau 72). Although Certeau’s subject is modern history-writing, the documentary gesture itself is hardly a modern one: almost every canonical pre-modern writer of history used documents somehow too. Herodotus famously quoted inscriptions in his *Histories*, a use of “evidence” that once made him seem the direct ancestor of the modern historian.⁸ Thucydides included a number of documents in his *History of the*

9. For Sallust's profound influence on medieval historical writing, see Smalley 165–75.

10. Bede used the correspondence of Gregory the Great (and others) in his *Historia ecclesiastica*: see, for example, Bede 1.28–32, 2.4, 2.10–11, 2.18. For Bede's use of Gregory's letters see Meyvaert 162–66. Eadmer made extensive use of Anselm's correspondence in his *Historia novorum*, for which see Gransden 139–40. Bede would have encountered Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* in Rufinus's Latin translation.

11. For the importance of documents and literacy in state-formation in this period, see Strayer esp. 24–25, 42–44. For an important critique of Strayer's notion of state-building, see Stein and Bisson.

Peloponnesian War “out of a desire to get small things right, and to emphasize that he had done so” (Hornblower vol. 2, 117). Sallust offers an *exemplum* of the intercepted letter that incriminated Catiline and foiled his conspiracy, allowing readers to see the instrument of his downfall with their own eyes (Sallust 34.2–35.6, 44.4–6).⁹ Individual books of the Bible quote letters within their narratives (e.g. 1 *Maccabees* 10.25–45, *ibid.*, 11.29–37; 2 *Maccabees* 1.1–11); taken as a whole, indeed, the Bible combines narrative with documents, including letters, law codes and transcriptions of stone tablets. The inclusion of the apostolic letters within the biblical canon in Late Antiquity, meanwhile, provided an especially important model for documentary history-writing, because Eusebius took it up in his *Ecclesiastical History* (which combined his own narrative and the texts of letters of the apostles' successors in the early church [Jones; Momigliano 140–42]; Bede, the towering figure of Insular historiography, seems to have imitated Eusebius's documentary practices in his own *Ecclesiastical history*).¹⁰

Given these precedents, therefore, it is perhaps understandable that the documentary gesture in the history-writing of the Age of the Angevins has been rendered more or less invisible. But while this invisibility is understandable, it is still surprising. For scholarship has long made high-medieval history-writing's documents bear an especially heavy ideological and theoretical weight. Those documents have played an ideological role in the history of this period because they have been taken as an index of their authors' interest in, and proximity to, the “central government.” Howden, Diceto – and their documents – are thus perceived as witnesses to, and participants in, the birth of the state that supposedly took place in just this period – and they are therefore considered especially useful to historians reconstructing that process today.¹¹ (Gransden, for example, thought that Howden's documents were evidence for Howden's praiseworthy “interest in the central government” [221]; J. C. Holt likewise thought that Howden's copies of Henry II's assizes “must stand as the genuine attempts of a person involved in government to record its actions” [89; see also Haskins 77; Southern 150–52; Bartlett 630–31].) Moreover, Howden's documents in particular have given his chronicle an especially prominent place in English legal and constitutional history. As the sole transmitter of the texts of Henry II's assizes – important milestones in the history of English law – Howden's histories have been exhaustively mined for their documents, leaving them, in the process, “looking worthy but dull” (Gillingham, “Travels” 71).

12. The medieval preference for eyewitness history has its roots in the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville: according to Isidore, history took its name from the Greek verb *historein* – to see or to know – because “among the ancients no one would write history unless he had been present and had seen what was to be written down” (Isidore 67). As D. H. Green suggests, eyewitness and documentary history are closely related: in historical writing in an Isidorian mode, Green argues, “reliable written sources may replace eyewitnesses in a civilization whose historical consciousness is matched by a high degree of literacy.” (Green, *Medieval Listening* 238).

13. By contrast with literary scholars, medieval historians have tended to think more in terms of ‘authentication’ than authority (mostly because authenticating things has long been central to the historian’s craft), but they too have noted how history-writers used documents to increase the reliability of their narratives. Diana Greenway, for example, thinks Ralph de Diceto “endeavored to make his work as authentic as possible by incorporating lengthy quotations from contemporary letters” (Greenway 152). And Julia Barrow has noted how William of Malmesbury deployed charters earlier in the twelfth century in order to “support the [historical narrative] by authenticating what is being said.” (Barrow 68).

14. These shifters designate “any reference to the historian’s listening, collecting testimony from *elsewhere* and telling it in his own discourse.” (Barthes 8, original emphasis). As Paul Ricoeur has put it, “history is born from the taking of a *distance*, which consists in the recourse to the *exteriority* of the archival trace” (Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* 139; my emphasis).

15. For the connections between rhetoric and history-writing, see now Kempshall and the papers collected in Breisach.

From a theoretical point of view, on the other hand, documents are thought to have played a newly important role in high-medieval history-writing because they helped persuade its audiences that their narratives were true. This was an urgent concern, because if the Age of the Angevins was the age of documentary history, it was also the period in which literary fiction broke into the cultural mainstream (see e.g. Green, *Beginnings*). Because high-medieval history-writing was “thoroughly dependent on the techniques of fiction to represent the reality of the past” (Stein 10) – and because there was “nothing in literary tradition or contemporary thought to suggest that history required a new and special mode of discourse” in the Middle Ages (Partner 196) – history-writers now had to signal clearly to their audiences that the “contract” they were establishing with them was one of history rather than fiction (Otter 9–12). Along with devices such as the claim to have been an eyewitness to an event (Beer 23–34; Fleischmann 301; Morse 144–45; Damian-Grint 75–76; Lodge 266–68), documents are generally considered to have been *the* crucial device with which a history-writer could claim her narrative was true,¹² and authoritatively so.¹³ There are good reasons, of course, why this was the case (and indeed why it remains the case today). Whereas fictional narratives need refer to nothing but themselves, invoking a document allows history-writers to claim that their narrative has an external referent. Because documents exist outside – before and beyond – the narrative that refers to them, they function as what Roland Barthes called “testimonial shifters” (Barthes 8). A history-writer cannot deny that he or she constructed her narrative themselves. But by invoking a document, he or she can speak through a voice that was apparently there already. The events I’m talking about really happened, the historian insists. And if you don’t believe what I say, see for yourself: ask the documents; they’re right here.

Of course, medieval history-writers had not read much Barthes. But many of them were familiar with classical rhetorical theory,¹⁵ which among other things provided them with a vocabulary with which to talk about narrative discourse and its relationship with truth (see esp. Mehtonen; Minnis and Scott). Like Barthes, the ancient rhetoricians also emphasized that the exteriority of documents could make their narratives seem true (or *veri similis*) (Kempshall 350–427). Appealing to what the rhetoricians called ‘extrinsic testimony’ was a crucial way of increasing the verisimilitude of an account of deeds supposedly done in the past. According to Cicero, extrinsic testimony comprised those proofs that “rest upon no intrin-

16. Cf. Cicero, *De orat.* 1.16, on the perils of making things up in narratives when “*tabulae*” testified to something different.

17. For further examples of history-writers using documents explicitly to assert the truth of what they were writing, see Kempshall 219–29.

18. Hayden White complained a long time ago that “it [is not] unusual for literary theorists, when they are speaking about the “context” of a literary work, to suppose that this context – the “historical milieu” – has a concreteness and an accessibility that the work itself can never have.” (White, “Literary Artifact” 89). Much has changed in medieval studies since White wrote that, but it remains the case that literary scholarship has been far more interested in the relationship between historical and fictional *narrative* in the twelfth century than in the documents that are apparently so important in signaling a narrative’s historicity. As White emphasized, “historical documents are not less opaque than the texts studied by the literary critic” (89).

sic force of their own, but external authority” (Cicero *De orat.* 2.173).¹⁶ As Matthew Kempshall explains, such proof “can be established by various means, but the basic distinction lies, according to both Cicero and Quintilian, between human and documentary sources” (Kempshall 182). Because the rhetoricians felt that “human witnesses are . . . always open to doubt” (Kempshall 182) – they might have been lying, they might have been of dubious moral character, they might have just been plain wrong – they suggested that presenting documents (“*tabulae*,” “tablets”) to an audience alongside a narrative was a particularly powerful way of making that narrative feel more true. As Cicero’s “Antonius” puts it in an example of such a strategy in the *De Oratore*, “*Hoc sequi necesse est, recito enim tabulas*” (“This must inevitably follow, for I am reading from the documents”) (2.173). One of the many things that medieval history-writers took away from the textbooks of classical rhetoric, therefore, was that documents, in their externality, could work as truth-claims. Paul the Deacon, writing his *Historia romana* in the late eighth century, was thus thoroughly conventional in his assumption that documentary evidence could work as “a guarantee against lying” (Kempshall 219). That view became a historiographical commonplace, and remained so throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.¹⁷

I do not argue here that documents did not function as “testimonial shifters,” or as “extrinsic testimony,” or as truth claims in high-medieval history-writing. On the contrary, this is precisely how they did function. But I do argue that we need to be clear about what those documents actually *were* before we can be sure about what documents *did* in the history-writing that quoted them. Literary studies’ emphasis on documents’ role as truth-claims, I argue, risks opposing the literary to the documentary too starkly.¹⁸ Concentrating solely on documentary truth-claims, that is, risks giving the impression that – unlike historical narrative, whose complicated entanglement with literary forms has long been understood – documents themselves occupied a purely non-literary space, or at least provided a secure representational link to one. I argue here, by contrast, that the kinds of epistolary documents that history-writers used in this period were often characterized by the very same narrativity that characterized the histories that used them. And they had just as complicated a role in representing the past as historical narrative did itself.

Documents and letters

The problematic status of documents in history-writing from this period can be illustrated, first of all, by thinking a little about the modern English word “document.” When used colloquially nowadays, the word “document” tends to evoke a domain (or discourse) that is specifically not fictional: “documentary” movies are expected to deal with the real world in a way that dramas, say, are not; a recent edited collection called *Medieval Letters* carried the subtitle “Between Fiction and Document,” as if the two words were antonyms (Bartoli and Høgel). More technically, meanwhile – and especially when it is used in connection with history-writing – the word “document” today strongly evokes the positivist tradition of historiography and the scientific criticism of sources that went (goes) along with it. The word “document” evokes that normative historiographical practice, which aims to reconstitute, “on basis of what documents say . . . the past from which they emanate and which has now disappeared far behind them” – a practice in which “the document [is] always treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence, its fragile, but possibly decipherable trace” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 6). Documents, therefore, are held to offer “factual or referential propositions” (LaCapra 17), from which the reality of the past can be reconstructed. The trouble with these modern senses of the word “document” is that there was no equivalent to them in the Age of the Angevins. Roger of Howden, for example, used the word “documentum” just once, and that was to describe a didactic maxim he had borrowed from Claudian (Howden, *Gesta* vol. 1, 199).¹⁹ By contrast, the words that history-writers themselves used to describe their documents tended to privilege their form, rather than their historiographical function. So, when Howden refers to what we call documents, he refers variously to *assisae*, *calumniae*, *capitula*, *cartae*, *concordiae*, *consuetudines*, *conventiones*, *decimae*, *decreta*, *epistolae*, *libera*, *leges*, *litterae*, *mandata*, *opiniones*, *pactae*, *paces*, *praecepta*, *placitae*, *rescripta*, *scripta*, *sententiae* and *verba*. And none of these words evoke the documentary as a special ontological or referential domain.

So the medieval Latin word *documentum* did not mean the same thing as the modern English word “document.” But history-writers’ documentary lexicon nevertheless has a good deal to tell us about how these intertexts worked in the Middle Ages. In particular, the frequency with which Howden designates intertexts as *epistolae* in his chronicles (seventy-six per cent of the intertexts that he rubri-

19. Howden’s monastic contemporary, Gervase of Canterbury (d. after 1210), also uses this didactic sense of the word *documentum* in his *Gesta regum*. Gervase mentions the “virorum fidelium documenta” ‘teachings of trustworthy men’ that can inform history-writers, alongside “scripta autentica”, i.e. charters and privileges. (Gervase of Canterbury vol. 2, 4).

20. In the *Gesta*, Howden rubricates forty-two of the seventy-five texts that he quotes. Thirty of these forty-two texts carry the rubric “epistola,” one has the rubric “litterae,” and one is rubricated both as an “epistola” and as “litterae.” Howden – like Ralph de Diceto and Gervase of Canterbury – called most of his intertexts *epistolae* because most of them indeed took the form of the letter. Letters – defined here simply as written texts addressed from one named individual or group to another – make up 59% of the intertexts in Howden’s *Gesta*, a figure that rises to 69% for his *Chronica*, 73% for Gervase’s *Chronica* and 93% for Diceto’s *Ymagines*. (Charters and treaties, of course, are also forms of letter, although they are addressed to all those who might “see or hear” them “now or in the future,” rather than to named individuals.)

21. See e.g. Holt, and Corner, “The Texts.” John Gillingham has argued that the twentieth-century mining of Howden’s chronicles, first for facts and then for documents, has left them “looking worthy but dull.” (Gillingham, “Travels” 71).

cates in his *Gesta*) suggests that in order to understand the relationship between history-writing and its “documents,” we need to understand the formal relationship between history-writing and epistolography.²⁰ Of course, the fact that English history-writers from this period reproduced more letters than any other form of text in their chronicles is in some ways not surprising: as Frank Barlow once pointed out, “it is notoriously difficult to classify medieval documents, because almost all are cast into the form of the letter, and classes shade into one another” (Barlow xliii; cf. Langeli 252). From the point of view of standard accounts of these chronicles, however, the epistolarity of these intertexts is very surprising. Because the chronicles have tended to be studied by those interested in administrative and constitutional history, the texts that have attracted the most scholarly attention are the legal codes that they include.²¹ In terms of numbers if not constitutional significance, however, it is letters that really dominate these chronicles. This (hitherto unremarked) preponderance of letters suggests that the epistolary form’s relationship to history-writing cries out to be understood more fully. And it is this relationship that I want to turn to now.

Letters, narrative and history-writing

One only has to read Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum* or John of Salisbury’s *Historia pontificalis* – the former is a history written as if it were a letter and the latter a letter written as if it were a history – to see how seamlessly letters and history-writing converged. At the root of this convergence lay a shared entanglement with narrative. History is a narrative discourse by definition – or, at least, “by definition, [it] cannot exist without narrativity” (Abbott 313). Narrative, meanwhile, was also hard-wired into letter-writing as a discipline. When twelfth-century students learned the art of composing letters (the *ars dictaminis*), for example, they learned that one of the principal parts of the letter was the *narratio*, where the sender told her or his recipient what had happened to prompt the letter’s writing (Boncompagno da Signa chs 17–19; *Aurea Gemma* ch. 1.6). Nor was this narrativity of letters just a matter of theory. By Howden and Diceto’s day, the narrativity of letters came to the fore as a new form of epistolary narrative – the newsletter – emerged, which would become fundamental to public, literate, political life in the later Middle Ages and on into modernity (Bazerman 23–24). Newsletters crisscrossed Europe in

huge numbers in the Age of the Angevins (Gillingham, “Royal Newsletters” 171–86). They announced victories on battlefields and they chronicled defeats, both at home and in the Holy Land. These newsletters were demonstrably epistolary: a named individual would address another and convey information to them in the form of a written narrative. Yet the actual contents of these letters were almost indistinguishable from historiography, and especially from the distinctive “fast historiography,” as Lars Boje Mortensen has called it, that emerged during the Crusades (Mortensen 25–39). Chroniclers like Howden (who was a crusader himself) copied such newsletters into the working texts of their histories almost as soon as they received them, often simply absorbing their narratives into their own by removing the letters’ addresses, greetings and farewells.²²

I want to pause at this point to offer a reading of one of these newsletters, which Roger of Howden reproduced in both his chronicles. This letter shows particularly clearly how, on the one hand, the narrativity of letters made them indispensable for history-writers. At the same time, the letter also reveals how that epistolary narrativity makes it hard to distinguish such letters from history-writing itself. Hugh de Nonant (bishop of Coventry, d. 1198) wrote this letter in 1191, addressing it to all and sundry to tell them the news of the spectacular downfall of his hated enemy, William de Longchamp (bishop of Ely, papal legate, royal chancellor, and vice-regent of England in Richard’s absence, d. 1197). Nonant had written the letter, he said, because “quae litterarum apicibus adnotantur, posteritati profecto signantur” (“the things that are noted down through the marks of letters are without doubt consigned to posterity”) (Roger of Howden, *Gesta* vol. 2, 215). Through the written word, Nonant claims, the present could address the future and teach it about the past. “By these very letters,”²³ he continues, “Eliensis episcopi ad notitiam omnium litteris instantibus volumus in posterum consignari, ut in hoc exemplari semper inveniatur et humilitas quod prosperet et superbis quod formidet” (“I want to bequeath to posterity the [tale of the] downfall of the bishop of Ely, so that in this example humility might ever-after discover what succeeds, and pride discover what is fearsome”) (215). Nonant then provides a long narrative recounting Longchamp’s vices (including his stubborn Frenchness) and his humiliating flight from his trial in Canterbury. Longchamp had run away from his trial disguised as a woman, Nonant related, and had tried to swim to France. But he was washed up half-naked on Dover beach, Nonant salaciously went on, before a fisherman blew his cover, hav-

22. See e.g. Roger of Howden, *Gesta* vol. 1, 128–30, Roger of Howden, *Chronica* vol. 4, 58–59 and Ralph de Diceto vol. 1, 409–10. Of course, not all the letters in these chronicles contained narratives: some of them simply gave orders (e.g. the letter instructing Diceto and the chapter of St. Paul’s to elect a new bishop; Ralph de Diceto vol. 2, 63), some of them were exhortations (e.g. the letter that Pope Lucius III sent to Henry II, exhorting him to provide for Margaret, his widowed daughter-in-law, Ralph de Diceto vol. 2, 30–31). But such letters are a small minority in Howden’s and Diceto’s works.

23 “Litteris instantibus” – i.e. “by these very graphemes” or “by this very letter:” the ambiguity here between technology and literary form is deliberate.

24. Although Howden says nothing about his purposes, Gervase of Canterbury explains how, in histories or annals “multa quaerenti sedulo bene vivendi repperiuntur exempla, quibus humana ignorantia de tenebris educitur, et in bono proficiat edocetur” (“the diligent seeker [can] discover many examples of how to live well, through which [examples] human ignorance is led out of darkness, and is instructed how it might advance in virtue.”) (Gervase of Canterbury vol. 1, 87). Diceto, meanwhile, said that he used the words he did in his chronicles, he said, “ad victorias principum declarandas, ad pacem omnium jugiter recolendam, et semper provehendam in melius” ‘in order to shine light on the victories of princes, in order to recall everyone to peace, and in order to improve everyone for the better’ (Ralph de Diceto vol. 1, 267). For history-writing and demonstrative rhetoric more generally, see (Kempshall 138–71).

25. According to the rhetorical manuals, the question of “what sort of person” (*qualis est*) a defendant was – which embraced the defendants character (*animus, attributa personis*), their *habitus* and their emotional state (*affectio*) – was central to forensic rhetoric. See now Kempshall 175–77.

ing put his hands up his skirt “deputans scortum” ‘thinking [he] was a prostitute’ and realizing his mistake (219).

Nonant’s letter was a very public form of gloating. But he set the letter up as a written *exemplum*, whose narrative about Longchamp would move its readers to embrace humility. It was a didactic *documentum* – it was intended to teach (*docere*) posterity about political hubris – long before Howden used it as a “historical document” to do the same. (As Roy K. Gibson and A. D. Morrison argued, pre-modern letters have a “natural inclination towards the delivery of instructions, [which,] combined with the relative simplicity of communication style, gives the letter form an astonishing didactic utility and range of application . . . in pursuing a didactic agenda, the letter genre becomes remarkably elastic” [ix–x].) In their didactic stance, therefore, newsletters like Nonant’s were already very similar to history written in a demonstrative mode. They were very similar, that is, to much of the history written in the High Middle Ages.²⁴ In the letter’s extended account of Longchamp’s career and downfall, meanwhile, Nonant’s letter also marks out its debts to the sort of rhetorical narrative on which historiography also depended. (In this case, it resembles nothing so much as a forensic *narratio*, which used evidence of a defendant’s bad living to persuade a jury that they had done bad things.)²⁵ Finally, as a self-consciously written artifact – addressed to posterity and designed to function even though its author was absent – it was already inscribed before Howden transcribed it into his chronicle. It was already history-writing before Howden wrote it into his history.

The intertexts in Howden’s and Diceto’s chronicles are mostly letters like this, whose form and rhetoric signaled that they were addressed to a teachable posterity, and whose authors intended that they should be preserved. Like Hugh’s letter, these texts were effectively already history-writing. They were autonomous units of historical narrative, whose authors used the written word to address their storied testimony to distant, future readers. The narrativity of letters, when allied with their writtenness, thus gave them a self-sufficiency that meant that they could wield a didactic, political, or historiographical force long after they had left the hands of their authors. This inscribed narrativity meant that history-writers hardly needed to *do* anything to letters if they wanted to use them in their histories. Because letters already offered self-standing units of narrative, history-writers could simply reuse them as narrative elements within their own stories. Sometimes history-writers signaled that

26. Howden, for example, sometimes presented the same letter differently in each of his two chronicles. In the account of the year 1188 in his *Gesta*, for example, Howden reproduces a newsletter about developments in the Holy Land as if it were a letter, introducing it with the words “nuncii Philippi regis Franciae . . . in hac forma scripserunt” (Roger of Howden *Gesta* vol. 2, 51). When he came to rewrite that entry in his *Chronica*, he presented the report in indirect discourse: “Nuncii regis Franciae . . . domum reversi narraverunt quod . . .” (Roger of Howden *Chronica* vol. 2, 355).

they were using extrinsic material by quoting letters complete with their protocols, and by rubricating them as *epistolae*. But sometimes they silently appropriated epistolary narratives, giving no sign that that is what they had done.²⁶ History-writers could lay letters down as if they were narrative building blocks, in other words, and combine them with narratives they had composed themselves. As a consequence, chroniclers could – and did – deploy letters and their own narratives in all sorts of different ways in their chronicles. To take Ralph de Diceto’s epistolary intertexts as an example: sometimes he connects them to the narrative entries that precede and follow them, using parataxis to do so. (That is, he does not explicitly say how the narrative and the letters are related, but he arranges them in a way that implies that they are.) So during his account of the year 1188, for example, Diceto notes, in narrative form, that the Christian army had surrendered Jerusalem to Saladin in exchange for the captured Guy de Lusignan, and that Count Bohemond of Tripoli had died in captivity. Diceto then inserts a vituperative letter that Frederick II sent to Saladin, upbraiding him for profaning the Holy Land (Ralph de Diceto vol. 2, 56–57). Although Diceto doesn’t say as much, Frederick’s letter was a direct consequence of Saladin’s capture of Jerusalem, an event that stimulated all sorts of polemical writing. Diceto’s contemporary readers doubtless made the connection between the two things, and understood Frederick’s letter in the context of the surrender of Jerusalem. In other places though, Diceto’s epistolary intertexts and their neighboring narrative entries have little to do with one another, and sometimes they have nothing at all. In his account of the year 1187, for example, Diceto records the birth of Count Arthur of Brittany in narrative form (vol. 2, 48), before inserting a letter from Urban III directing Archbishop Baldwin of Canterbury to stop building his new collegiate church at Hackington (48–49). Here the letter and the narrative are not thematically connected, nor indeed is Diceto’s subsequent entry, which records how Henry II and Philip Augustus made peace near Châteauroux in the same year (49). Aside from their shared interest in the shifting power relations of the Angevin *espace*, these three entries have nothing in common. They deal with different actors doing different things in different places. Finally, Diceto sometimes transcribes a bald series of letters, his own narrative fading away entirely. In some places these letters are closely connected with one another – the series of letters about the Norman lands of Diceto’s friend Walter de Coutances is a good example (Ralph de Diceto vol. 2, 125–42). But in other places nothing at all

connects the letters that Diceto inserts: a letter relating how the Assassins murdered Count Conrad of Montferrat follows a letter from Celestine III to the province of York announcing Hubert Walter's legation; and it precedes a letter that Richard I had sent to the bishop of London complaining that the monks of Durham had secretly elected a new bishop (126–29).

Diceto, therefore, used these letters as self-standing units of historical narrative. Sometimes he used them *alongside* his narrative; sometimes he used them to *illustrate* his narrative. But often he used them *instead* of his own narrative. The letters already told their own stories, and he simply incorporated them into his codex. The important historiographical consequence of Diceto's practice is that letters had no epistemological priority over narrative entries in his chronicle, and narrative entries had no priority over the letters. The letters, that is, did not obediently serve up "evidence" for a narrative that made use of it; they did not function as truth claims; epistolary and narrative entries each carried equal historiographical weight. Diceto's summary of the chapters of his *Ymagines historiarum* (Ralph de Diceto vol. 1, 267–86) illustrates what the equivalence in priority between narrative and letter looks like on the page. In Diceto's summary, letters, the dispatch of letters, and Diceto's own narrative entries share equal emphasis. So, within the space of ten *capitula*, Diceto summarizes one straightforwardly narrative entry ("Hubertus Cantuariensis archiepiscopus legatus creatus est" ("Hubert, archbishop of Canterbury, was made legate"), one entry saying only that a king had dispatched some letters ("Philippus rex Francorum tres litteras scripsit archiepiscopo Rothomagensi", "Philip, king of the French, wrote three letters to the archbishop of Rouen"), and one entry summarizing the text of a letter – which Diceto presents *as if it were* a narrative entry like the other two ("Ricardus rex Angliae episcopo Ebroicensi, 'Significamus vobis'", "Richard King of England, to the bishop of Evreux: 'We inform you'") (Ralph de Diceto vol. 1, 284). In Diceto's world, therefore, the dispatch of letters – and letters themselves – were as much historical events as they were evidence for them. They belonged to the same order of significance as the narrative entries that he had written himself. The *externality* of letters, meanwhile, appears not to have played a particularly significant rhetorical role: nowhere does Diceto claim that his chronicle is more trustworthy or *veri similis* on the basis of the letters he included, even if that is what modern historians think about it.²⁷

27. See above, note 12.

28. Diceto served Foliot while the latter was bishop of London, and he had studied with Arnulf of Lisieux in Paris (Ralph de Diceto vol. 1, xxxi–ii). All three men were prominent figures at Henry II's court, "in the shadow" of which Howden wrote (Vincent 28).

29. Cartulary-chronicles also combined historical narrative and charters, and they have long been noted both for their complicated relationship with history-writing and for their overtly ideological purposes (typically, they were put together by monasteries in response to threats to their property and privileges). The close relationship between charters, cartularies, and history-writing is now well established. According to Marjorie Chibnall, for example, "History and charters [were] at times composed by the same men and in much the same language" (Chibnall 1). More recently, Monika Otter has noted that "many monastic chronicles are really cartularies, collections of local documents combined with portions of narrative history" (Otter 3); Leah Shopkow, meanwhile, has argued that there is no rhetorical "dividing line between cartularies and serial biographies" such as the *Liber Pontificalis* (Shopkow 23). Karine Ugé also argues this point strongly: "it is now well acknowledged, she says "that the boundaries between different narrative genres interpenetrate one another . . . The historical, commemorative and liturgical nature of charters, cartularies and gesta have long been recognized . . . [and] because of the elasticity of different genres, almost any kind of text could fulfill almost any need." (Ugé 13). Other important studies of the intersection between history-writing and cartularies include Geary esp. 13–26; Iogna-Prat 27–44; Foulds esp. 11–15; and Declercq 147.

30. Alan makes a nice distinction between the letters, which enabled readers to trace the "iter martyris" (the martyr's path), and John of Salisbury's narrative of Becket's life, which accompanied them in Alan's collection, and which "cleared that path" for its readers. "Joannis itaque opus primo perlegatur, per quod iter aperietur ad caetera quae sequuntur"

Collecting letters, writing history

Letters told their own stories, then, which history-writers re-told in their turn by reproducing them in their chronicles. If this suggests that history-writing and letter-writing were closely related narrative discourses in this period, then contemporary practices of letter *collecting* drive home the closeness of that relationship. It is instructive to think a little about the connections between history-writing and letter-collecting in this period, not least because the age of Howden and Diceto – that "golden age of historiography in England" – was also a golden age of the letter collection. As Howden and Diceto began writing their chronicles, Gilbert Foliot, Arnulf of Lisieux and Peter of Blois – three of the period's great controversialists – were assembling their letters in order to publish them. (Diceto knew all these men, and Howden probably did too.)²⁸ More significantly perhaps, a new form of epistolary collection also became widespread in this period, which combined letters with narrative and resembled the cartulary-chronicles that had emerged earlier in the Middle Ages.²⁹ In their use of chronological narrative, the new letter collections were more overtly historiographical than the letter collections of stylists like Peter of Blois. While the latter collections had presented "a controlled and selective image of the author" (Haseldine 336) – they celebrated their authors' personality and their prose style – they did not *tell a story* about them (they were not conceived of "an archival witness to the events of the author's life," says Julian Haseldine [336]). But once Alan of Tewkesbury had redacted Becket's letters and bound them up with John of Salisbury's *Life and Passion of St. Thomas*, he demonstrated what a powerful combination letters and historical narrative could be.³⁰ Gilbert of Sempringham's followers took Alan's lead and wrote a narrative *vita* of their patron and circulated it alongside his collected letters in order to argue for his canonization.³¹ The compiler of Gilbert's letters claimed that together the letters and narrative proved Gilbert's sanctity and the magnificence of his works (*Book of St. Gilbert* 198–9). Gerald of Wales, meanwhile, didn't – quite – claim that he was a saint, but he too demonstrated the polemical potential of the technique by weaving together letters and narrative to recount his disputed election to St. David's (he called it the *Liber de invectionibus*) (Giraldus Cambrensis 3:3–100).

Despite the fact that the bulk of these epistolary collections were made up of letters rather than passages of narrative, many of their

²⁸John's work should be read first, through which a path will be cleared for the other things that follow. (Tewkesbury 301).

³¹For the growth in importance of such compilations of written evidence in the canonization process in this period, see (Vauchez 38–39).

32. As D. H. Green explains, “although there is no hard and fast distinction, [the *ordo naturalis*] is commonly regarded as the hallmark of the historian, and the [*ordo artificialis*] as the characteristic of fictional writing” (Green *Beginnings* 96).

33. Among contemporary history-writers, Gervase of Canterbury and William of Tyre made this point explicitly. Gervase worried about chroniclers who calculated their chronology incorrectly; such chroniclers had introduced “a great confusion of lies into the Church of God.” (Canterbury vol. 1, 88). William of Tyre claimed his history of the Holy Land was true because he had “rerum autem incontaminatam prosequi gestarum seriem” (“followed the uncorrupted order of events”) (William of Tyre prol. 15).

34. Bernard Silvestris had called Virgil the “father of lies” for disregarding chronology in the *Aeneid* (Minnis and Scott 45). See also Conrad of Hirsau’s preference for Dares’ strictly chronological account of the fall of Troy over Virgil’s (151), and the classical examples compiled in (Lausberg par. 317, and pars. 443–52).

35. For the medieval reception of Eusebius/Rufinus’s notion of historiographical collecting, see Guenée 58–63.

compilers nevertheless claimed that they were engaged in a specifically historiographical task when they were gathering the letters together. They did this by foregrounding the distinctive combination of writtenness and narrativity that letters and history-writing shared. On the one hand, the collectors stressed that they had arranged the letters chronologically. This was partly a rhetorical move, designed underscore the authority and truthfulness of their collections. As the compiler(s) of the so-called *Book of St. Gilbert* put it, “exemplaria epistolarum . . . quibus beati G(ileberti) sanctitas et magnificentia operum eius merito commendata est et probata, in unam seriem congegimus” (“we have collected together into one sequence copies of letters . . . by which the sanctity of blessed Gilbert, and the greatness of his works, are rightfully commended and proved”) (*Book of St. Gilbert*, 198–99, my emphasis). The implication seems to be that the singularity and seriality of the collection adds to the authority of the *exemplaria* themselves. After all, as high-medieval rhetoricians had insisted, ordering things accurately was one of the ways one could be sure one was writing history rather than writing fiction,³² telling the truth rather than telling lies.³³ (Self-consciously following what the rhetoricians called the *ordo naturalis* was a good way of rejecting the *ordo artificialis* favored by “liars” like Virgil,” together with the fiction that that *ordo* implied).³⁴ The compilers may also have been inspired to stress the chronological order of their collections – and the role of historical narrative in holding them together – by Eusebius, whose *Ecclesiastical History* was one of the canonical works of Christian history-writing in this period. As Rufinus puts it in his Latin translation of the *History*, Eusebius had “historica narratione in unum corpus redigere” (“united into one body through historical narrative”) what his predecessors had written in dispersed places (Rufinus vol. 1, 9).³⁵ The monk who compiled the *Epistolae Cantuarienses* in the late twelfth century uses Eusebius’s words to state that he too had arranged the letters “in ordinem et unum corpus” (“into order, and into one body”) (Stubbs 1). The compiler of the *Book of St. Gilbert*, likewise, emphasizes that he had carefully arranged Gilbert’s letters into a single chronological sequence (*series*) (*Book of St. Gilbert* 198–99). Becket’s biographer Herbert of Bosham, meanwhile, praised Alan of Tewkesbury’s “diligence” in arranging Becket’s letters “secundum ordinem historiae” (“according to the order of history”) (Bosham 396).

Whether they were following the rhetorical textbooks that stressed the *ordo naturalis*, or simply following the example of Eusebius, when letter collectors in this period stressed the chronological

ordering of their collections they also emphasized the close relationship between their texts and history-writing. And by transcribing a series of lettered stories, by uniting them “into one body through historical narrative,” letter-collectors addressed themselves to posterity and struck a didactic pose, just like the history-writers who used letters as *documenta*. The compiler of the *Epistolae Cantuarienses*, for example – a collection of the privileges of Christ Church Cathedral Priory, Canterbury – opens his collection by praising the prudence of those who had committed the “rerum gestarum notitia” to writing. That was a distinctly historiographical turn of phrase, and the compiler aligns himself with those prudent writers of history (or *notitia rerum gestarum*) by using it. When he goes on to suggest that, in compiling letters about the disputes between Christ Church and the archbishops of Canterbury, he too was bequeathing “ea quae gesta sunt” (“those things that have been done”) to posterity, he underscores the closeness of that alignment (*Epistolae Cantuarienses* vol. 1, 1). Meanwhile, when Gerald of Wales justified recording “ea quibus in curia Giraldus . . . laudem obtinuit” (“the things by which he won praise at the curia,”) because “egregie dicta vel acta . . . ad posteritatis tam instructionem quam imitationem literis annotari solent et perpetuari” (“things said or done excellently . . . are accustomed to be noted down and perpetuated in writing”) (*Cambrensis* vol. 3, 11), he was using a phrase that almost any high-medieval history-writer with a modicum of rhetorical education could have written.

Emplotment and epistolary fiction

In their self-conscious and didactic writtenness, therefore, and in their narrativity, some letter collections in the Age of the Angevins resembled the period’s history writing to a strong degree. It seems possible that those who made chronological collections of letters in this period saw themselves as history-writers before they saw themselves as anything else. But if some of this period’s letter collections look and feel like history-writing, that resemblance invites us to ask important questions about the relationship between epistolarity and narrativity across the two genres. More specifically, it invites us to think about the relationship between letters, historical narrative and their claims to represent the reality of the past. Because, for all that high-medieval letter collectors stressed the historicity of their accounts – and for all that the letters they collected had (usually) once

been exchanged between real historical agents – modern narratology would point towards the fictiveness of the narrative framework that letter-collectors constructed when they compiled and published those letters. As Alun Munslow has argued, “history is made to cohere – is ‘put together’ – within an acknowledgement that it is the history (aka the historian) not the past that creates the structure and the shape and form of a history” (Munslow 8). While being careful to avoid conflating historical narrative with fiction, Munslow argues that “every history is a narrative discourse that is the construction of the historian.” Historical narrative, therefore, is a “fictive construction”: “it derives directly from the engagement of the historian as an author-storyteller who initiates and carries through the process of ‘envisioning’ or authorially focusing on the past as history” (8). The same thing, surely, goes for historiographical letter-collectors who used letters to “put together” stories about the past – and who use historical narrative to make those letters “cohere.” Using Hayden White’s terminology, one could argue that high-medieval letter-collectors ‘emplotted’ the letters that they put together. The compilers, that is, selected and arranged the letters in such a way to tell a story whose plot they had already prefigured. (White especially emphasizes the importance of emplotment in retrospective accounts of individuals’ lives – accounts, that is, like the epistolary accounts of the lives of Becket and Gilbert of Sempringham. “The meaning of real human lives,” White goes so far as to argue, “is the meaning of the plots, quasiplots, paraplots, or failed plots by which the events that those lives comprise are endowed with the aspect of stories having a discernible beginning, middle, and end” [White, “Literary Artifact” 83]).³⁶

36. Mary Beard, quite independently of Hayden White, gives a good example of how letter collections can be given the form of a story by being given the sense of an ending: “When, in a parody of editorial dispassion, the editors of Virginia Woolf’s letters decided to count her suicide note to Leonard as a ‘letter’ (number 3710, the last in the book), they made their collection at a stroke quite different from the one that would have ended at number 3709.” For Beard, Woolf’s editors had opted “for finality and narrative closure – rather than the day-to-day continuity of a writing life” (Beard 120–21).

Even if Hayden White’s perspectives are not universally accepted by medievalists, many medievalists would agree that letter-collectors actively intervened to shape the documentary record – that they offered “a controlled and selective image” of their subjects (Haseldine 336). Yet if we accept that the letters in letter collections were heavily emplotted by their compilers as they offered that image, this raises the question of whether the same thing can be said of the letters that history-writers like Howden and Diceto reproduced in their histories. At first glance, the answer to this question seems to be negative. Because, despite the similarities of their narrative forms – and despite their common claim to represent the past – there is a crucial difference between historiographical letter-collections and history-writing like Howden and Diceto’s. While letter-collectors might well

37. Monastic chronicles that recounted on the history of a particular house from its foundation were more discrete than Howden and Diceto's chronicles, though they were more expansive than saints' lives.

38. Perhaps unwittingly, White here echoes medieval distinctions between histories ("historiae") and chronicles, genres that had been precisely defined by authorities like Isidore of Seville and Cassiodorus. According to Gervase of Canterbury, for example, those who write histories should "strive for the truth, and to soothe [their] hearers or readers with sweet and elegant speech; and to teach truly the actions, manners, and life of him whom he describes . . . The chronicler, on the other hand, calculates the years of the Lord's incarnation and the months and days of the years, and briefly explains the deeds of kings and princes that took place in them" ("propriū est historici veritati intendere, audientes vel legentes dulci sermoni et eleganti demulcere, actus, mores vitamque ipsius quam describit veraciter edocere . . . Cronicus autem annos incarnationis Domini annorumque menses computat et kalendas, actus etiam regum et principum quae in ipsis eveniunt breviter edocet") (87). See now Guenée 1006–07).

39. Paul Ricoeur makes a similar, if more epistemologically inflected, point: "A story, says Ricoeur, 'is made out of events to the extent that plot makes events into a story. The plot, therefore, places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity: to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot' (Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 171).

40. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, with whose work White engages but disagrees, the variousness – and value-laden nature – of the chronolo-

have emplotted letters to tell the story of a life now lived (or, in Gerald's case, a career now over), chronicles did not always narrate such discrete and bounded stories.³⁷ Howden's and Diceto's chronicles had no end under whose sign their epistolary middles could be organized: they simply stop, presumably when their authors died or became too frail to continue writing. Indeed, viewed from Hayden White's perspective, Howden and Diceto were not strictly speaking writing histories at all. Although they might have arranged "elements in the historical field" into the "temporal order of their occurrence," they did not always then organize that "chronicle" into a "story" "by the further arrangement of the events into the . . . process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end" (White, *Metahistory* 5).³⁸ In truly historical accounts of the past, White argues, "events must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence, but *narrated* as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence" (White, *Content of the Form* 5, my emphasis).³⁹ On White's reading, chroniclers like Howden simply recorded events and documents in the order in which they originally occurred "under the assumption that the ordering of the events in their temporal sequence itself provided a kind of explanation of why they occurred when and where they did" (White, "Literary Artifact" 93).

But this does not therefore mean that incorporating self-standing epistolary narratives into a broader chronological and historiographical arrangement was an entirely artless business.

As White concedes elsewhere in his work, there is "nothing *natural* about chronologically ordered registrations of events" (White, *Content of the Form* 176, my emphasis). Nor is there anything natural about chronologically ordered "registrations" of letters. For one thing, the very fact that correct chronology – the rhetoricians' *ordo naturalis* – was taken in the High Middle Ages to be a marker of truthfulness means that a chronicle's chronology was itself a scale charged with epistemological value.⁴⁰ Moreover, even White accepts that so-called "naïve" chroniclers organized events and letters into something *like* a story, albeit one lacking "the characteristics that we normally attribute to a story: no central subject, no well-marked beginning, middle, and end" (6). As White himself argues in his powerful reading of the *Annals of St. Gall* – a paradigmatic example of annalistic history-writing, in which very little is recorded except the passing of the years – "there must be a story [here], since there is

41. According to Munslow, “individual facts do not in and of themselves create a meaning or explanation except in the sense of statement of justified belief. What matters in a historical explanation is the ways the statements of justified belief are made to hang together to represent a causal relationship. And the essence of history is the establishment and description of this causal relationship, that is, which historians of a particular kind define as the most likely story to be told” (Munslow 44).

42. Historical narratives, White argues, “succeed in endowing sets of past events with meanings [...] by exploiting the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions” (White, “Literary Artifact” 91). And, White argues, while “historians may not like to think of their works as translations of fact into fictions,” White argues, “this is one of the effects of their works” (92).

surely a plot – if by plot we mean a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole” (9).⁴¹ The explicit chronological ordering of the *Annals*, manifested in “the list of dates of the years ... confers coherence and fullness on the events ... the list of dates can be seen as the signified of which the events given in the right-hand column are the signifiers. The meaning of the events is their registration in this kind of list” (9).

The possibility that even chronicles had plots is a particularly important concession when it comes to understanding the relationship between letters and narratives in high-medieval chronicles. Because if “the meaning of the events is their registration” – and if the fact of registration “confers coherence and fullness” on events – then that is as true for the letters that chroniclers reproduced as it was of the narrative entries that they had composed themselves. (It is useful here to recall that the roots of the word “registration” lie in *res gestae*.) To misuse White’s formulation, the meaning of *letters* is their registration in “this kind of list.” As we have already seen in practice, the chronological registration of letters in chronicles conferred on them a status co-equal to that of historical events – it *made* them historical events by elevating them into the order of historiography, by indexing them against the same set of chronological diacritics that gave historical events their meaning. When chroniclers incorporated letters into their chronological rendering of the past, therefore, they organized those letters into some kind of meaningful plot, even if they did not necessarily marshal them into the heavily emplotted narrative forms that compilers used when they fashioned the lives of others out of letters. And a meaningful plot is a fictive structure, a “fabricated ‘historical form’ ... as much intuited by the historian as it is by practitioners in art and literature” (Munslow 99).

To argue that history-writers incorporated letters into a fictive (and fabricated) structure is not necessarily to agree with White’s conclusion that such emplotment is necessarily a “fiction-making operation” (White, “Literary Artifact” 85).⁴² As Munslow argues, history-writers “reconstruct or construct the past ... differently to those authors who produce a fictional narrative-discourse-story. Plainly and conventionally the historian creates a narrative account of events that is convincing because it is consistent with their ... sources, which may, of course, be structures of data. Historians conventionally are held not to be free to create, invent or design their own stories” (Munslow 118). Yet even if history-writing or emplotted letters

were not fiction – and they were demonstrably not fiction in the Age of the Angevins – this does not mean their shared investment in narrative could not sometimes allow history-writers to strategically blur the lines between those categories. So at this point I want to pause to look more closely at a history that does just that. Because, if nothing else, the games that history plays with letters casts light on epistolary histories that do not seem interested in playing games at all.

The text in question – Stephen of Rouen’s *Draco Normannicus* – stands out for the canny way it uses epistolary narrative to play fiction and history off against one another. Its high metahistorical awareness thus allows us to take a bearing on the relationship between history-writing, letters, and the narrativity that they shared with fictional discourse. And it allows us to chart the implications of the high-medieval awareness of that relationship. The *Draco Normannicus* is a narrative poem about Henry II and his ancestors that Stephen wrote at the monastery of Le Bec in the late 1160s (which was also the period when Howden and Diceto began writing their chronicles). The *Draco* is clearly not a chronicle – it is famously chronologically disordered (Kuhl 421–38), and Stephen wrote it in elegiac couplets (Harris 114). But Stephen does use fairly standard historiographical language to claim that he is writing a work of history: he says he will “describere . . . actus” (“record the acts”) of Henry II (book 1, line 59), after “scribere . . . gesta” (“writing the deeds”) of the Danes in Normandy (1.61) and “narrating” (*narrare*) the battles of William the Conqueror (1.75).⁴³ Stephen, moreover, cites just the kind of letter that the chroniclers of his era would cite. Like, say, Roger of Howden, Stephen makes close reference to the written discourse of high diplomacy, referring to a letter that Henry the Lion (duke of Saxony, d. 1195) conveyed from his uncle, Frederick Barbarossa, to Henry II (3.234–294). And he directly quotes the letters that Pope Alexander III and the anti-Pope Victor VI sent to one another, each accusing the other of being a schismatic (3.477–520 and 3.521–76).⁴⁴ The way Stephen uses these papal letters promises to be particularly revealing, not least because papal letters make up the single biggest group of letters in Howden and Diceto’s chronicles (Bainton appendix A). But these letters are also revealing because they demonstrate how history-writers could exploit the fictive nature of epistolary narrative even as they were calling on extrinsic testimony to assert the historicity of their narratives.

Although the rest of this essay could be devoted to unpicking Stephen’s papal politics, suffice it to say that he doesn’t seem too both-

43. Stephen also invokes Virgil by saying that he will “sing” of Rollo’s battles (book 1, line 62) and of the Norman dukes’ deeds (1.79).

44. Scholarship on the *Draco* has almost entirely overlooked these letters – and what they reveal about history-writing – not least because it has been so drawn to the exchange of letters between Henry II and King Arthur that Stephen inserts later in the *Draco* (for which see below). For a pathbreaking recent exception, see Kuhl 435–36.

45. Stephen's taste for dialogue is also evident in the "altercatio" between a *Francus* and *Normannus* that he inserts in book two of the *Draco* (lines 831–940, and presumably has something to do with his rhetorical interests ("[Stephen's] chief intellectual interest was in rhetoric . . . the wealth of the Bec library in rhetoricians proves [that] rhetoric . . . [was] one of the chief interests there" (Tatlock 1)). Stephen wrote both a prose and verse introduction to Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, and refers to Quintilian and Cicero many times in his work. For the introductions, see Omont 173–80 and 96. For the connections between (epistolary) dialogue, debate and reported speech in the *Draco*, see Kuhl 431–37.

46. For a nuanced exposition of showing, telling and the relationship of the two to fictionality, see Booth 3–20.

47. "Id est argenti, id est auri," notes the *Draco*'s annotator. (Stephen of Rouen 727 n.2).

ered about which claimant had right on his side. For Stephen, the schism at Rome mainly revealed the Roman propensity for strife (3.394), which had begun (he said) when Romulus murdered Remus, and which had been stoked by Roman avarice ever since (3.459–60). Stephen uses Alexander's and Victor's letters to reveal their authors' politically divisive (and typically Roman) greed. The *Draco* verges towards satire at this point, and it obtains its satirical coloring mainly from the way Stephen arranges the popes' letters in his text. Stephen presents the letters as if they were in adversarial dialogue with one another.⁴⁵ Each pope reproaches the other in similar – and similarly divisive – words. Stephen thus opens up an ironical distance between his own voice as a narrator and the voices of the two papal adversaries. This allows those voices to compete with one another, and to tell very different stories about the schism. So Stephen uses the letters to *show* his audience how the ecclesiastical hierarchy squabbled, rather than *telling* them about it, to use the proverbial terminology of creative writing courses.⁴⁶

Stephen's point here is not literary but political. By introducing stories about the schism that compete with the story he was telling about it himself, Stephen raises the possibility that at least one of their narrators might be unreliable – a possibility he raises to the point of certainty in Alexander's case. In particular, Stephen seems to want to question the loud claims that Alexander III had made about his own poverty. In Alexander's letter to Victor, Alexander had insisted that "aurum non cupio, contentus vestibus, esu" ("I don't seek gold, I'm content with my clothes, I'm well-fed") (3.561). Yet immediately *before* reproducing Alexander's letter, Stephen himself had told his readers that Alexander he had rushed to Rome searching madly for the "relics of Rufinus and Albinus" as soon as he had heard about Victor's election. (Those "relics" are "shopworn equivalents for cash discredibly given," [Noonan 200] –⁴⁷ "the stock-in-trade of [medieval] satirists" [Barraclough 301, qtd. in Noonan 200].) Alexander says he is poor; Stephen insinuates that he is avaricious, if not a simonist. Who is Stephen's audience to believe?

Stephen uses his own narrative about Alexander's money-collecting in Rome to put Alexander's honesty in doubt. Yet his epistolary satire runs deeper even than this: Stephen opens Alexander's letter to an ironical reading by allowing his reader to know more than Alexander does. As Stephen presents it, Alexander was unaware that anyone else knew about his trip to Rome, still less that they are muttering about it behind his back. Alexander accentuates his poverty in

48. For the irony generated by the romance narrator who knows more than his characters, see Green, *Irony* 233.

49. Neither letter made it into Jaffé-Lowenfeld's *Regesta pontificum Romanorum*, but it is unclear whether this is because the editors thought the letters to be spurious, or whether they were unaware of their existence.

his own letter to promote his own virtues. Yet because Stephen had already told his readers about Alexander's avarice, those readers know about his simoniacal avarice all too well. So Stephen's readers *know* more than Alexander – and they know that they know more – even if Alexander doesn't know that they do.⁴⁸

It is unclear whether Stephen was versifying genuine correspondence between Alexander and Victor here, or whether he made it up.⁴⁹ What is more significant, however, is that whilst Stephen was using an apparently historiographical and forensic technique – quoting the text of letters, invoking “extrinsic testimony” – that technique nevertheless uses structures also found in ancient (and modern) epistolary fiction. As Janet Altman explains, “the letter novelist (A) must make his letter writer (B) speak to an addressee (C) in order to communicate with a reader (D) who overhears” (Altman 210). Stephen (A) makes Alexander (B) speak to Victor (C), and we, the readers (D), “overhear.” Of course, using a technique also found in epistolary fiction does not make epistolary history-writing fictional. But understanding that technique's role in epistolary fiction nevertheless reveals something of how its rhetoric works in epistolary historiography. By allowing his readers to read over Alexander's shoulder, Stephen allows them (us) to draw conclusions about Alexander on the basis of the mismatch between what we know about him from Stephen's narrative and what Alexander himself says to Victor. By protesting too much about his poverty, Alexander condemns himself in his own words.

Stephen also uses other aspects of documentary rhetoric to blur the distinctions between the internal and external readers of these letters, thereby enhancing the satire he is setting up. For, as well as reproducing the content of the papal letters, Stephen surrounds them with a narrative account of Alexander and Victor reading them. He describes the way the popes baulk at one another's words, showing their adversaries' letters to their own friends and advisors in disgust. Reading Victor's letter, Stephen says, Alexander “fertur in iram;/ ostentat sociis, mandat et ista simul” (“becomes angry: he shows it to his intimates, while composing the following [letter] for [Victor]”) (Stephen of Rouen 3.521–22). When Victor received those angry words from Alexander in his turn, Stephen says, he showed Alexander's letter to *his* allies (“Victor Alexandri dum verba tumentia legit/ Legistris sociis intimat illa suis” ‘While Victor reads Alexander's bloated words, he reveals them to his lawyer-friends’ [3.577–78].) All the while, of course, Stephen is showing those same letters

to us, his readers. By letting us *see* the letters' *verba tumentia*, he invites us to react to the adversaries' reactions to one another. We might collude with them, or we might reject them.

This interplay between internal and external readers, which Stephen achieved by narrativizing Alexander's and Victor's respective acts of reading, is typical of epistolary fiction. As Patricia Rosenmeyer notes, in ancient Greek epistolary fiction, readers are always "dealing with two sets of readers: the actual addressee . . . and the wider public, secondary readers . . . who may expect and achieve something entirely different from their reading experience" (Rosenmeyer 3). So while Alexander might have been angered when he read Victor's letter (as Stephen says he was), Stephen's own readers might be sympathetic towards it or perhaps just amused. As Altman suggests, "the epistolary novel's tendency to narrativize reading, integrating the act of reading into the fiction at all levels . . . constitutes an internalizing action that blurs the very distinctions that we make between the internal and external reader" (112). This blurring between internal and external readers seems precisely the effect Stephen sets out to achieve in his accounts of the letters' performance.⁵⁰

A further exchange of letters that Stephen reproduces in the *Draco* suggests Stephen created this blurring effect quite deliberately. The letters in question purport to have been exchanged between Henry II and King Arthur, the latter "fatorum lege perennis" ("ever-living by law of the fates,") reigning over the Antipodes and apparently given to intervening in twelfth-century geo-politics (Stephen of Rouen 2.969).⁵¹ According to Stephen, Arthur wrote to Henry threatening to attack him unless he withdraw his troops from Brittany, which he had invaded in 1167. Stephen deliberately puts fiction and history into play here. In "Arthur's" letter, Arthur supports the Bretons' resistance to Henry by quoting (and versifying) chunks of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum britanniae* (*HRB*) that (he claimed) proved the Bretons to be the rightful rulers of Brittany. The *HRB*, of course, claimed to be a true history of Britons extending from their origins in Troy, but its self-conscious metahistorical games means that it has always been surrounded by the whiff of fictionality.⁵² Stephen joins in Geoffrey's games firstly by citing the *HRB* as if it were a true history, and then by versifying the text of a letter that Geoffrey has Arthur send to the Roman emperor to defy him in the *HRB* itself. So a document versified in a history – Arthur's letter to Henry in the *Draco* – refers to a "history" – the *HRB* – that refers to a letter. Unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth, Stephen does not seem to be playing fiction

50. This is not to say that such public readings did not actually happen in the Middle Ages: as I have argued elsewhere, such public readings were precisely what made letters such powerful political tools (Bainton "Literate Sociability").

51. These letters have mainly attracted scholarly attention because of their contribution to Arthurian literature, and because of the political implications of Stephen's deployment of Arthur: see e.g. Tatlock; Aurell, "Henry II and Arthurian Legend" 385–86. Their rhetorical and/or historiographical implications have never been considered at any length, although Aurell notes that the "intellectual renaissance of the time encouraged the reading of the letters of Cicero, and also the letters of Alexander to Darius, which is explicitly mentioned in an annotated passage of Stephen of Rouen, who could have read them in the Latin translation by Leo the Archpriest which his abbey of Bec had". Aurell then accuses Stephen of "indulging in a stylistic exercise" (Aurell, *Plantagenet Empire* 156).

52. For a powerful account of the *HRB*'s engagement with fictionality, see Green, *Beginnings* 168–75.

and history off against each other for their own sake here. Rather, he is using the intersection between history, letters and fiction to make a subtle political point, in this case about Henry II's claims to Brittany. As he did with the papal letters, Stephen makes his point by narrativizing the moment that Henry received Arthur's letter. Henry, Stephen says, "epistolam Arturi coram proceribus suis in silva Britonum legi fecerit" ("had Arthur's letter read out before his barons in the forest of the Britons") (Stephen of Rouen 705). And then, "unperturbed" (*nil pavefactus*) by Arthur's threats, Henry composed his reply to Arthur, "subridiens sociis" ("smiling") at his friends' while he did so (Stephen of Rouen 2.1218). Stephen himself makes no comment on the authenticity of "Arthur's" letter. Nor does he discuss the status of the Arthurian "history" that Arthur invokes in the Bretons' support. But by having Henry laugh in the face of Arthur's bellicose letter – "subridens sociis" – Stephen dismisses the entire Breton storyworld in two words. Stephen, therefore, uses Henry's reaction to Arthur's letter to distance himself from its content, to signal that he was not himself taking it seriously. This was not simply a way of warning his readers that the letter was not a genuine truth claim. It was also a way of impugning the whole Arthurian tradition along with its credulous Breton adherents, of a piece with Stephen's call for Henry to adopt a more muscular approach towards his neighbors in France.⁵³ By narrativizing the reading of letters, therefore, and by allowing his readers to read over his characters' shoulders, Stephen produces layer on layer of distance between the letters and his readers. While doing so, he creates just the ambiguities that one finds in epistolary novels, where the "readings ... and misreadings" of characters within the work "must enter into our [own] experience of reading" (Altman 112).

Stephen thus played on the techniques of "documentary" historiography in a way that resembles some kind of epistolary fiction. He did so, it seems, in the name of satire, in order to entertain (*delectare*) his audience and in doing so teach them (*docere*) serious truths about the high politics of the day. His point here was thus simultaneously literary *and* political. Stephen used Arthur's letter, on the one hand, to signal the complicated relationship between letters and fiction. In particular, Stephen seems to use the figure of the absent Arthur in order to thematize the absence that all letters presuppose (according to Cicero and to high-medieval epistolographists, letters had been invented precisely to communicate with those who were not present [Cicero, *Ad fam.* 2.4.1]).⁵⁴ On the other hand, Stephen uses that epis-

53. For the politics of the *Draco*, see Harris 112–24.

54. According to Isidore of Seville, it was "appropriate" that the Greeks had called letters "epistolae," because *stola* are "things sent away" (Isidore of Seville 6.8.13, translation modified). Joining the dots between Isidore's position and Cicero's, perhaps, the twelfth-century master of the *ars dictaminis* Buoncompagno da Signa explained that "epistola est cirografus absenti persone destinatus" 'a letter is a *cirografus* addressed to an absent person' (Buoncompagno 8.1).

55. Walter J. Ong also used letters to illustrate the modalities of fictionality. Ong insisted on the rule that “the writer’s audience is always a fiction,” and he used letters to prove it. “Although letters don’t immediately seem to fall under this rule,” Ong said, “by writing a letter you are somehow pretending the reader is present while you are writing, [so] you cannot address him as you do in oral speech. You must fictionalize him, make him into a special construct” (Ong 19). Jacques Derrida makes a similar point about the fictionality of epistolary audiences, wondering at one point whether the “addressee” of his *Envois* should take the direct or indirect object: “Encore en train – je t’écris entre Oxford et Londres, près de Reading. En train de t’écrire (toi? à toi?)” (Derrida 38).

56. Patricia Rosenmeyer has pointed out, “*whenever* one writes a letter, one automatically constructs a self, an occasion, a version of the truth,” just as one does in lyric poetry (which “creates a different ego upon each occasion of reperformance”) (Rosenmeyer 5, my emphasis).

57. Jacques Derrida wonders whether the “addressee” of his *Envois* should take the direct or indirect object: “Encore en train — je t’écris entre Oxford et Londres, près de Reading. En train de t’écrire (toi? à toi?)” (38).

58. For Horace’s epistolary problematization of poetry, see De Pretis esp. 107.

tolary absence in order to emphasize the fictionality of Arthur, or at least his ambiguous historicity (he was living, as he does in “another world,” as William of Newburgh might have put it). As a number of critics have implied, letters are fertile material with which to problematize the unity and empirical reality of authors like Stephen’s “Arthur.” In particular, letters exhibit that “plurality of egos” that Foucault identified specifically with the “author function” (Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 129). The “I” in whose voice a letter is written, that is, does not necessarily refer to a single, real, speaking subject. Rather, it refers to the fictive construct that the pioneering theorist of fiction, Wayne C. Booth, christened the “implied author,” which embraces the “intricate relationship of the so-called author with his various official versions of himself” (Booth 71). Tellingly, Booth illustrated this “implied author” by invoking the practice of letter-writing.⁵⁵ “Just as one’s personal letters imply different versions of oneself,”⁵⁶ Booth suggested, “so the writer [of fiction] sets himself out with a different air depending on the needs of particular works” (71). Of course, this split between the real and implied author was never more evident than in the Middle Ages, when letters were almost always scribed, and often composed, by someone other than the person in whose name they were sent. If the fictiveness of the epistolary “I” brings letter-writing within the orbit of fictionality from one direction, the fictiveness of the “you” to whom all letters are addressed holds it there from the other. Walter J. Ong insisted on the rule that “the writer’s audience is always a fiction,” and, like Booth, he used letters to prove it. “Although letters don’t immediately seem to fall under this rule,” Ong said, “by writing a letter you are somehow pretending the reader is present while you are writing, [so] you cannot address him as you do in oral speech. You must fictionalize him, make him into a special construct” (Ong 19).⁵⁷ Small wonder, then, that throughout history those who have sought to upset received typologies of written discourse have found the form of the letter an ideal place to go and make trouble. From Horace’s *epistulae* (are they letters or satires?)⁵⁸ and Ovid’s *Heroides* and *Tristia* (which contain the *real* letters?), right up to Jacques Lacan’s seminar on Poe’s *Purloined Letter* and Jacques Derrida’s *The Post Card*, poets and critics have used letters to make difficult claims about the relationship between literature on the one hand and *littera* on the other – that is, between a form of written, verbal, art and the graphic marks on which all writing depends.

Stephen of Rouen would feel at home with the trouble-makers; he uses the epistolary form here to make trouble, of both a political and historiographical sort. He is, after all, engaged in some kind of metahistorical game in the *Draco*, which he clearly signals by his decision to write his history in epic Latin verse. (And while there were plenty of Norman precedents for writing history in Latin verse, notably Guy of Amiens's *Carmen de Hastingae proelio*, and Dudo of Saint-Quentin's prosimetric *Historia normannorum*, none of them is versified written correspondence. If it was one thing to compose letters in verse, as Baudri de Bourgeuil had done, it was quite another to render prose correspondence into verse, which necessarily involved changing its word-order and vocabulary and could therefore never claim to be representing an original word-for-word reproduction).

The question that Stephen's practice raises is whether one finds similar games, similar strategies, in the work of prose chroniclers like Howden and Diceto – and what the implications of Stephen's practices are for our reading of that work. It is certainly the case that neither Howden nor Diceto shrink from reproducing letters sent by figures of dubious historicity – the “old man in the mountain,” for example (Ralph de Diceto vol. 2, 77), or Prester John (Roger of Howden, *Gesta* vol. 1, 210–12), or even Jesus Christ (of course, Christ was not of dubious historicity in this period, but presumably not everyone believed that he wrote letters about the perils of holding markets on Sundays, the likes of which Howden reproduced in his *Chronica* [vol. 4, 167]). It is also true that both Howden and Diceto sometimes narrativize the reading of letters in a way that resembles the *Draco*. Howden, for example, frequently binds letters to his narrative by following a letter with the words “quibus [litteris] auditis,” before going on to explain what the consequences of that letter were – a move that further underscores letters' event-like status.⁵⁹ And, as I have shown elsewhere, when the political stakes were particularly high, Diceto and Howden both integrate the reading of letters into the political theatre that they were narrating, and did so as a means of giving voice to some political actors and taking it away from others (Bainton, “Literate Sociability” 30–35). Finally, throughout their chronicles Howden and Diceto used the schema Altman identifies with epistolary fiction: by making the contents of letters available for all to see, a letter-writer is made to communicate with an eavesdropping audience via the letters he or she writes to another party. None of this means, however, that Howden and Diceto were writing epis-

59. See, e.g. Roger of Howden, *Chronica* vol. 2, 80, 258, 300, 351; vol. 3, 168 and Ralph de Diceto vol. 1, 369; vol. 2, 107.

tolary fiction. It does not mean that the letters that they quoted were made up. Nor does it mean that they were necessarily interested in thematizing the fictionality of letter-writing (as Stephen of Rouen was), or in exploring the boundary between fiction and history (as Stephen did). And nor does the fictiveness of the epistolary “I” (and “you”) mean that Howden and Diceto were engaged in “fiction-making” when they reproduced letters in their chronicles. But Stephen of Rouen’s games make sense now – and would have made sense in the Middle Ages – precisely because he pushes the “documentary” practices of the likes of Howden and Diceto to their logical conclusions. He highlights the fact that that anyone who used a letter as a narrative building-block *intervened* in the epistolary discourse that they reproduced, whether they were a letter-collector or a chronicler.

Despite Stephen of Rouen’s interest in the relationship between history and fiction, we do not necessarily have to think of documentary intervention within the framework of fictionality that Stephen of Rouen proposes. Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of different sorts of historical document in his *History, Memory, Forgetting* might be helpful to clarify this point. Ricoeur divides “historical documents” into two categories: “voluntary witnesses,” and witnesses “in spite of themselves.” “Voluntary witnesses” are what people wrote down specifically with posterity in mind. As *written* testimonies, these documents are “detached from the authors who ‘gave birth’ to them” (169). Their subsequent deposit in an archive means that they are “handed over to the care of those who are competent to question them and hence to defend them, by giving them aid and assistance.” Witnesses “in spite of themselves,” on the other hand, are “the target of indiscretion and the historian’s appetite” (170). According to Ricoeur, modern historians largely use documents as “witnesses in spite of themselves:” they use documents to tell stories that the documents themselves do not tell (171). It seems to me that the letters that Howden and Diceto reproduce fall into both these categories simultaneously. The self-conscious writtenness, and the manifest narrativity, of letters like that of Hugh de Nonant’s suggest that they functioned as Ricoeur’s “voluntary testimony.” They addressed their storied testimony to a distant audience, either removed in space or time from that of their composition; they told their own stories; and their rhetoric did whatever it could to emphasize its own endurance and stress its need for preservation. The archives, meanwhile, were the histories themselves. By copying documents into their histories, history-writers posed as archivists and registrars, caring for them, defending

60. As Michael Clanchy puts it, chronicles' authority as texts meant that they were "the most secure and productive form of record in existence" in this period (Clanchy 103).

them, giving them "aid and assistance." Howden did not *question* No-nant's letter in the manner of Ricoeur's modern historians. He did, however, defend it against the ravages of time, and gave it "aid and assistance" by preserving it within a codex, and within the chronological framework of a chronicle – a venerable and authoritative framework, designed to transmit knowledge of the past safely to the future.⁶⁰ On the other hand, giving letters archival "aid and assistance" like this involved integrating them into a new epistemological framework. It involved selecting them and fashioning them parts of a new whole – and it thus transformed them from isolated utterances into elements of a series which conferred on them a new meaning. Stephen of Rouen seems to intimate that, potentially at least, this maneuver could turn letters into witnesses *against* themselves as much as witnesses in spite of themselves. It is important to acknowledge that potential, and it is important to acknowledge that history-writers in the High Middle Ages acknowledged it, even if it does not mean that every letter that a chronicler quoted was being used against its author.

So how does this change our understanding of documents in the history-writing of the Age of the Angevins? Firstly, "documents," as we call them now, are hard to prize apart from the historical narratives that use them: they frequently offered their own narratives, and were sometimes even a form of history-writing themselves. Sometimes, meanwhile, the fictive techniques that letter-writing employed could become part of the story that a history-writer was telling (this is the case with Stephen of Rouen). Sometimes history-writers told stories through arranging letters, using the fictive technique of emplotment as they did so – all the while they stressed the historicity of the *ordo naturalis* (this is the case with, say, the *Book of St. Gilbert*). Sometimes history-writers used letters as mini-narratives in a story that they shaped by nothing more than chronological order (this is the case with Howden and Diceto). What all these cases show, however, is that epistolary intertexts were far more than merely being a tool by which history-writers could distinguish their own discourse from fiction. Epistolary intertexts are as complicated as the historical narratives that used them.

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